

## Cast of Characters

Eteocles	son of Oedipus, king of Thebes
Messenger	Eteocles' Spy
Chorus	of unmarried Theban women The Chorus Leader speaks for the group in the dialogue sections
Antigone	daughter of Oedipus
Ismene	daughter of Oedipus
[Herald] <sup>1</sup>	Creon's mouthpiece

### *Non-speaking parts*

Extras to represent a crowd of Theban citizens, Eteocles' entourage, Eteocles' arms-bearer. Possible extras to represent the six other defenders of Thebes to face the seven attackers. Pallbearers to bring in the bodies of the fallen brothers.

*Seven against Thebes* is a two-actor play. It was first performed in 467 BCE.

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1. With most other editors, critics, readers, and translators, I believe that the epilogue (lines 1011–83), which includes the part of the Herald, was added later. For a summary of the arguments and bibliography, see Hutchinson (1985: 209–11). Many editors believe the introduction of the two sisters is also an interpolation: for example, Dawson (1970: 24–25); see also Conacher (1996: 71–74).



## Seven against Thebes

SCENE: *The action takes place on the acropolis of Thebes. The orchestra is decorated with altars and statues to the city's gods. The play starts with a tableau of Eteocles addressing a crowd of Theban citizens. Stage right represents the nearer distance (the town of Thebes); stage left the farther distance (the battlefield outside the walls).*

### Prologue<sup>2</sup>

ETEOCLES:

Citizens of Cadmus,<sup>3</sup> to say what the times call for  
is the role of whoever guides the ship of state,<sup>4</sup>  
plying the tiller, never letting his eyes rest in sleep.  
If we do well, the gods will get all the credit;  
but if—heaven help us—disaster should befall us,  
Eteocles is the one name that would be chanted

5

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2. The Prologue is the part of the play before the entrance of the chorus. *Seven* begins with a monologue followed by a dialogue, which is also the usual practice of Euripides. In this case the scout's report is almost a second monologue, except that he delivers it to a specific person. Aeschylus' *Suppliants* and *Persians* begin with the entrance of the chorus; *Prometheus* opens with a dialogue between Hephaestus and Kratos (*Might*, personified); the three plays of the *Oresteia* begin with monologues.

3. 1: "City of Cadmus" and "Cadmeians" or "citizens of Cadmus" are the usual terms in tragedy for Thebes and Thebans respectively. The presence of citizens in the opening tableau is also an effective part of the staging of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Euripides' *Suppliants* begins with a tableau that includes the chorus. Eteocles grabs our attention with the urgency of this speech.

4. 2: *Ship of state* and other nautical imagery, especially the enemy army as a swollen angry sea, are constants in *Seven* (for example, 62–4, 113–15, 207–10, 602–4, 652, 769–71, 854–60). See Thalmann (1978: 32ff.), Dawson (1970: 18–19).



by citizens all over the city in waves of loud *karangues*  
 and cries of woe. Zeus, our Protector, be true  
 to your name<sup>5</sup> and defend the city of Cadmeians.  
 10 Now, all of you—those still short of full maturity,  
 and those who are past the prime of life but still  
 strive to maintain full physical vigor, and all  
 who are in the springtime of youth—as you are able,  
 you must come to the aid of our city and the altars  
 15 of our country's gods and never let their worship  
 be blotted out; for your children and for Mother Earth,  
 your nurturer, who tended you as infants crawling  
 on her loving ground, welcoming all the burden of your  
 tender care so you would grow up to be householders  
 20 and bear arms,<sup>6</sup> be loyal to her now at this time of crisis.<sup>7</sup>  
 This much can be said: despite the long siege, to this day  
 Fate's balance has been on our side. Thanks to the gods,  
 the war for the most part has been going in our favor.  
 But now, the seer,<sup>8</sup> keeper of birds, with infallible skill  
 25 has given the word, making observation of the feathered flocks  
 with his ears and in his mind, without resorting to fire.<sup>9</sup>  
 Our master of such oracles has declared that  
 the greatest Argive onslaught has been debated  
 during the night and they are plotting to sack the town.  
 30 Make haste to the parapets and gates of our city wall,  
 go with all speed, arm yourselves in full panoply;  
 man the battlements and take up your posts

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5. 9: *True to your name*: cf. Latin, *nomen-omen*, the idea that the name expresses the essence of the person or thing (see lines 144–46, 405, 439, 536–37, 578–79, 828–30; Hogan 1984: 245, 255).

6. 19–20: Thoreau translates, “shield-bearing colonists.”

7. 16–20: After the Ship of State, the second major theme is the Earth, as motherland, as nurturer, as source of the “Sown Men,” and as receiver of the dead (see Dawson 1970: 19–22).

8. 24: The blind seer, Tiresias, though not named in this play, was a well-known figure in Theban legend. The prophecy that Eteocles refers to is confirmed by the spy's report.

9. 25: *Without fire*: a common method of divination was to examine the innards of sacrificed animals before putting them on the fire, but Tiresias' observation is from sound, the cries of birds and the noise of their wings in flight.



on the scaffolds of the towers; at the city-gates  
 make your stand with valor and do not fear  
 the assault of attackers. God will bring us victory.  
 I have myself sent scouts to spy on their army;<sup>10</sup>  
 I am confident that their mission is not in vain.  
 When I hear their report I will not be caught off guard.

35

*(Assembled citizens exit stage right.)*

*(Messenger enters stage left.)*

MESSENGER (SPY):

Eteocles, most valiant king of Thebes, I am here  
 to bring clear intelligence of the army outside.  
 All that was done I saw with my own two eyes.  
 Men, seven in all, their side's hot-blooded leaders,  
 slit a bull's throat into a black-rimmed shield,  
 dipped their hands into the victim's warm blood,  
 and swore an oath by Ares and Enyo,<sup>11</sup> spirit of war,  
 and bloodsucking Terror,<sup>12</sup> either to tear down the city  
 and by force to sack the Cadmeians' town,  
 or to die and drench this land with their blood.  
 With their hands on Adrastus'<sup>13</sup> chariot they wound  
 tokens for their parents at home to remember them by,  
 letting their tears fall, though not a sound of woe was heard.  
 There breathed in them a steely heart, glinting  
 with valor, like lions with battle in their eyes.  
 I have come at once to bring you this intelligence:  
 I left as they were casting lots to see where each one  
 by luck of the draw would lead his troops to the gates.  
 With all speed post our best warriors, the elite

40

45

50

55

10. 36: This is Eteocles' way of announcing the messenger and letting us know to expect him.

11. 45: *Enyo* is a goddess of war. In the *Iliad* she was a warrior goddess called "sacker of cities" (5.333) and along with Ares led the Trojans into battle (5.592).

12. 46: *Terror*: this is the god Phobos (or *Rout*).

13. 49: Adrastus is king and leader of the expedition, but not one of the seven attackers; see also Euripides' *Suppliants*, in which he is a major character; in *Phoenician Women* he is one of the attackers.



6 learns from #10  
messenger spy

## AESCHYLUS

of Thebes, to face them at the outlets of our city-gates.  
The army of Argives armed to the teeth is near;  
60 it is on the move, it is raising dust, the white foam  
dripping from the horses' mouths stipples the plains.  
You, now, like a ship's unwavering helmsman,  
fortify the citadel before the gales of war can shatter it.  
A swelling surge of troops rumbles over the land.  
65 Seize whatever chance is most opportune.  
I will keep my eyes unblinking watchers by day  
for what is coming; with clear intelligence, in safety,  
you will be kept abreast of what is beyond the gates.

*(Messenger exits stage left.)*

ETEOCLES:

Oh, Zeus and Earth, gods who keep our city safe,  
70 my father's Curse, potent Fury of revenge,<sup>14</sup>  
do not, I pray, wipe out our city from stem to stern  
in total ruin, prey to hostile forces. We are speakers  
of Greek; do not destroy our hearths and homes.  
Do not ever shackle under the yoke of slavery  
75 a land that is free, the city built by Cadmus.  
For our common good, be our mighty fortress:  
a country that prospers gives honor to its gods.

*(Eteocles exits stage right.)*

## Parodos<sup>15</sup>

#2  
enters in  
terror

*(The Chorus enters in terror from both sides  
as if coming from all parts of the city.)*

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14. 70: The Curse and Fury (*Erinys*) seem to be identified as they are in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (*Furies*): "Curses we are called in the halls below the earth" (417).

15. The Parodos is the entrance song of the chorus. Usually this is in an orderly procession along the side entrances (*parodoi* or *eisodoi*), as in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, but here the chorus may make a scattered entrance. The first part is not divided into strophe and antistrophe. The meter is primarily dochmiacs (— — — —), which are used to express



## CHORUS:

My cries shrill with panic.

The army is let loose. It has left camp and advances  
in a mighty flood, a host on horseback streams in front.

The dust rising to the sky is what convinces me,  
a herald clear and true without a sound.

And now the plains of our land pounded by hoofs  
boom in my ears. It swoops, it bellows  
like a torrent no force can resist crashing on the hillsides.

Oh, oh!

Oh, gods, goddesses, this swelling evil,  
keep it back. The din rises above our walls.<sup>16</sup>

The horde, flashing white shields, sweeps onward,  
stampeding toward the city.

What god, what goddess  
will save us?

Who will hold it back?

Should we throw ourselves on  
the statues of our fathers' gods?

Oh, blessed gods, throned on high,  
it is time for us to cling to your images.

Why do we hold back  
in our loud shrieks of woe?

Don't you hear? Are you deaf to the clanging of shields?

What time is better to make offering  
of robes and wreathes to add to our prayers?<sup>17</sup>

The din—I see it! It's not the sound of one lone spear being  
shattered.

What will you do? Will you betray your own people,

Ares, ancient god of our land?<sup>18</sup>

Oh god of the golden helmet, look on us,  
look on our city that you once loved so well.

extreme agitation (see Hutchinson 1985: 57–59 for a detailed metrical analysis).

16. 88: Hutchinson's suggestion for this uncertain line (1985, note at 89ff.).

17. 102: The offering of a new robe to a goddess is often part of an annual ritual (as in the Panathenaea; see also *Iliad* 6.269–79; 285–311), but there it is done in solemn, dignified procession.

18. 105: Thoreau translates, "aboriginal Ares."

#3 terrified of  
the war, that  
will lose  
and be  
killed 80

85

90

95

100

105

#3  
scared  
Gods won't  
hear their  
cries



Guardian gods of our land,  
 come, all of you, come,  
 110 look at this band of girls!  
 On our knees we pray:  
 Save us from captivity.  
 A human surge with waving plumes  
 laps around the city,  
 115 driven on by Ares' squalls.  
 Oh Zeus, father,  
 perfecter of all,  
 save us, keep us  
 from hostile hands.  
 120 Argive men circle the city Cadmus built.  
 → Their weapons of war make us shiver in terror.  
 The bits in the horses' jaws  
 let out a rattle of death.  
 Seven proud chiefs towering above the army,  
 125 shaking spears, take their stands as allotted  
 at the seven gates.  
 And you, daughter of Zeus,<sup>19</sup>  
 powerful war-lover,  
 save our city,  
 130 Pallas Athena. And you on horseback,  
 lord of the sea,  
 Poseidon of fish-spearing trident,  
 grant us deliverance,  
 deliver us from this terror.  
 135 And you, Ares, protect  
 the city named for Cadmus,  
 care for the city,  
 show yourself in person  
 to honor your kinship.  
 140 And Cypris Aphrodite,  
 first mother of our people,<sup>20</sup>  
 hold back the hordes. We are born

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19. 127–65: Members of the chorus run from statue to statue of the gods they call upon.

20. 140–41: Aphrodite's daughter Harmonia became the wife of Cadmus, founder of Thebes. Aphrodite is called Cypris because at her birth she rose from the sea near Paphos on the island of Cyprus.



of your blood. We draw near you, reciting  
litanies, invoking the gods.

And you, Wolf King Apollo,

145

be a wolf to the enemy army, make them pay for our pain.<sup>21</sup>

And you, maiden goddess, daughter of Leto,  
ready your bow, dear Artemis.

[Strophe 1]

turning  
(dancing) in song

Ah, ah, ah, ah,

I hear the clattering of chariots all around the city.

150

Oh, goddess Hera!

The fittings rattle

under the loaded axles.

Oh, dear Artemis. Ah, ah, ah, ah.

The air is wild with the shaking of spears.

155

What harm will our city suffer? What will become of us?

What doom will the gods bring down upon us?

[Antistrophe 1]

Ah, ah, ah, ah,

stones are raining upon our battlements,

hurled from far away. Oh, dear Apollo!

At our gates a ringing of bronze-fitted shields!

160

Son of Zeus, you who

settle the final hallowed

outcome in war!

And you, oh blessed queen, Athena Onca,<sup>22</sup> for our city

preserve your seven-gated home!

165

21. 145–46: *Lykeios* (“of a wolf” or “wolflike,” from *lukos*, “wolf”) is an epithet for Apollo, possibly referring to Apollo as “wolf-slayer” or “Lycian,” “from Lycia.” In Argos his main cult was that of *Apollo Lykeios*. At *Iliad* 4.101 he is called *Apollo Lukēgenēs*, which is interpreted as “wolf-born,” “born in Lycia,” or “light-generating.”

22. 164: Onca is a title of Athena, derived from the name of a Phoenician goddess. Her temple and cult were established by Cadmus when he founded the city (Scholion, Schwartz, 1887 (1966): to line 1062 of Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*).



## [Strophe 2]

Oh, gods all-powerful,  
 gods sublime, sublime goddesses,  
 protectors of this land,  
 do not forsake our city circled by war  
 170 to an army of alien speech.<sup>23</sup>  
Hear the maidens,  
hear our prayers,  
our arms stretched out with justice.

## [Antistrophe 2]

Oh, gods most cherished,  
 175 redeemers, encircling our city,  
 show that you still love our land,  
 that you care for the people's sacrifices,  
 and preserve us with your care.  
 Remember, we implore you,  
 180 the city's devotion,  
and our rich offerings.

## First Episode

*(Eteocles enters stage right.)*

ETEOCLES:

You preposterous women,<sup>24</sup> do you think this is  
 the best way to keep our city secure and instill  
 courage in our troops blockaded inside the towers,  
 185 throwing yourselves at the images of our gods,  
baying and bawling, and subverting civic stability?  
 I pray to god never to live in a house full of women,  
 whether in hard times or blessed with prosperity.

23. 170: Both Thebans and Argives spoke Greek, but different dialects.

24. 182–202: Eteocles' misogynistic tirade is part of a pattern of his distrust of the female. Of course, the Sphinx is one of the dreaded female monsters of Greek mythology. Eteocles' own mother Jocasta has broken the taboo against incest. The women of the chorus, though they are reduced to despair, are not the enemy within, in the larger context of Eteocles' situation in family and city.

#4 He's disgusted  
 and angered by  
 their cries + them  
 begging to the  
 Gods



SEXIST

If they get their way they make life unbearable,  
but if they're anxious it's still worse for home and city. 190  
And now with your frantic running this way and that,  
you spread despair and cowardice among the citizens,  
while giving aid and comfort to our enemies outside  
the walls, making us destroy ourselves from within.  
This is what you get from living among women. 195  
And if there are any who do not obey my command,  
whether man or woman or anything in between,<sup>25</sup>  
a sentence of death by public stoning will be cast  
against them, and they will not escape their doom.<sup>26</sup>  
Foreign affairs are men's concern. Women's opinions 200  
are not wanted. Stay inside and keep out of trouble.<sup>27</sup>  
Did you hear me or not? Or am I speaking to the deaf?

#4 He thinks  
they're  
only contributing  
to cowardice  
and destroying  
the city  
from  
inside

[Strophe 1]<sup>28</sup>

\*talks down to  
women\*

CHORUS:

Oh, dear son of Oedipus, I was terrified  
when I heard the din, the din of rattling chariots,  
the clang of the wheels spinning, 205  
the jangle of reins, their bits forged in fire,  
straining in the horses' mouths.

ETEOCLES:

So then, do sailors by careening from stem  
to stern find a means of saving their skins  
when the ship is foundering on the swelling seas? 210

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25. 197: Eteocles' intention is probably to be rhetorically inclusive rather than to propose a third gender.

26. 198–99: Hecht and Bacon (1973: 75) translate, “the public shall drop its fatal weight on his name,” explaining in the note: “The pebbles which convicted a man of treason are here assimilated to the stones with which the sentence was executed.”

27. 200–201: The notion that woman's place is in the home is typical of Greek thought, not specific to Eteocles (see also *Iliad* 6.431–41, 490–93, where Hector tells his wife to go back home to her weaving, “war is the concern of men,” 492).

28. 203–41: The choral parts are sung; Eteocles speaks in iambs.



## [Antistrophe 1]

CHORUS:

215 In my frenzy I came to the gods'  
ancient images, trusting in the divine, when I heard  
the pounding of rocks hailing down on our gates;  
then I was whipped by terror to pray to the gods  
to shield our city from harm.

ETEOCLES:

Pray that our towers hold back the enemy's spear.  
The gods will see to this. But the saying goes  
that the gods desert a city when it is captured.

## [Strophe 2]

CHORUS:

220 Oh no! Never in my lifetime let this congress  
of gods abandon us. Let me never see  
our city overrun in the chaos of war and enemy troops  
setting it ablaze with ravishing fire.

ETEOCLES:

225 When you summon the gods do not anticipate evil.  
The mother of success is Obedience, and  
that is where salvation lies, as the proverb goes.

## [Antistrophe 2]

CHORUS:

True, but the gods' might surpasses all;  
in dire times it often raises the helpless  
out of deep misery, as clouds are hovering  
over their eyes.

ETEOCLES:

230 That is men's work, to perform blood sacrifices  
to the gods, when we are beset by hostile forces.  
Yours is to keep silent and stay inside the house.



## [Strophe 3]

CHORUS:

Thanks to the gods the city we live in is unconquered  
and our towers shelter us from the enemy hordes.  
What reason have you to threaten us with punishment?

235

ETEOCLES:

I do not begrudge your worshiping the gods;  
but keep calm and do not give in to panic and  
cause the men of the city to be disheartened.

## [Antistrophe 3]

CHORUS:

I heard a startling chaos of noise  
and came in terror here to the citadel,  
our revered sanctuary.

240

ETEOCLES:

If you hear of men being killed or wounded,  
do not take in the news with shrill outbursts—  
that is Ares' supper, the blood of dead men.

CHORUS:

What I hear now is the snorting of horses.

245

ETEOCLES:

You hear it, but try not to hear it so noticeably.

CHORUS:

From the very ground the city groans under siege.

ETEOCLES:

It's my job, mine alone, to deliberate on these issues.

CHORUS:

I am so afraid. The crashing at the gates gets louder.

ETEOCLES:

Will you be quiet? Your words are doing the city harm.

250



CHORUS:

Congress of gods, do not forsake our battlements.

ETEOCLES:

Damn you! Can't you endure your fate in silence?

CHORUS:

Gods of our city, do not let me be taken into slavery!

ETEOCLES:

It is you who are making slaves of me and the city.

CHORUS:

255 Zeus, almighty god, turn your thunderbolt against our foes.

ETEOCLES:

Oh, Zeus, what a breed you have given us in women.

CHORUS:

An unhappy breed, the same as men whose city is taken.

ETEOCLES:

With your hands on the holy images such words bring ruin!

CHORUS:

Yes, fear takes hold of my tongue along with despair.

ETEOCLES:

260 I have one small favor to ask of you—please listen.

CHORUS:

I will know it if you tell me as quick as you can.

ETEOCLES:

Keep quiet, you wretch, and do not dishearten our side.

CHORUS:

I am quiet. I will suffer the same fate as the rest.



ETEOCLES:

I much prefer this to what you were saying before.

And now one more thing, move away from the shrines;  
make this your petition, that the gods fight on our side. 265

First hear my vow and then add your own voices,  
raising in joy the sacred shout of praise and victory,  
the sacrificial cry that is the custom of the Greeks,  
instilling boldness in our side, quelling fear of war. 270

I swear to the gods of this country who protect our city  
dwelling on the plains or watching over the market,  
and to the springs of Dirce and the waters of Ismenus,<sup>29</sup>  
if we meet with common success and the city is saved,  
the gods' altars will run red with the blood of sheep 275  
[and with the blood of slaughtered cattle—that is my vow],<sup>30</sup>

and I will set up trophies of victory and deck the holy  
temples with spear-won spoils stripped off the enemy.<sup>31</sup>

You pray to the gods in this way, too, not with outcries,  
not with vain and inarticulate barbarous mutterings. 280

You will not any more escape your fate by doing that.

Now I will go and post six men with myself the seventh  
to oppose our enemies, like the soldiers we are,<sup>32</sup>

stationed at the seven entrance gates to the city 285  
before messengers arrive in hot haste bringing  
swift-running rumors to inflame us with urgency.

*(Eteocles exits stage right.)*

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29. 273: Dirce and Ismenus are the two rivers of Thebes.

30. 276: Considered spurious on stylistic grounds.

31. 279: Line 279 is considered spurious by most editors, since it repeats much of 277–78.

32. 283: Hutchinson (1985) believes a line is lost after 283 and that the second half of the line means “that proud manner of theirs.”



First Stasimon<sup>33</sup>

CHORUS:

[Strophe 1]

I hear his words, but cannot calm the fear in my heart.  
 Cares, my heart's constant neighbors,  
 290 kindle terror's fire,  
 terror of the army encircling the walls,  
 like an anxious dove  
 in dread of snakes, nightmarish bedmates,  
 for her young brood in the nest.  
 295 Right now against the walls  
 in a great swelling surge, with wave upon wave of troops,  
 they are coming. What fate is in store for me?  
 More men are hurling  
 jagged rocks  
 300 at our citizens, bombarded from every side.  
 Help us, gods,  
 born of Zeus, whatever way you can  
 help the city, the people born of Cadmus.

[Antistrophe 1]

What place on earth braver than this will you take up  
 305 if you abandon to the enemy  
 our rich-soiled land,  
 and the waters of Dirce,  
 most sustaining of all rivers  
 that Poseidon,  
 310 cradler of earth,  
 and Tethys' river children<sup>34</sup> send forth?  
 And so, oh gods,  
 protectors of the city, cast

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33. 287–368: This ode is full of epic allusions and even includes several instances of Homeric phrasing, making the comparison to the fall of Troy more explicit.

34. 311: Tethys is the wife of Oceanus. Her children are the rivers of the world.



upon those outside the walls  
 man-slaughtering death and the doom of panic  
 to throw away their weapons,  
 and win glory for yourselves in the people's eyes.  
 Be saviors of the city;  
 stay in your fine abodes  
 in answer to our wild, wailing prayers.

315

## [Strophe 2]

What a pity to cast a city so ancient  
 down to Death's dominion, captive slave  
of the spear, crumbling to dust,  
ruthlessly devastated  
by the Argive host through gods' will,  
and the women subdued, oh no, not that!  
young and old to be dragged away  
by their hair, like horses,  
their garments torn to shreds. Wailing goes up  
from the city as it is being emptied,  
a confused cry from the ravaged human plunder.  
This is the heavy fate I fear.

320

325

330

## [Antistrophe 2]

What grief for innocent girls plucked unripe  
from their homes before their wedding day  
to reach the end of a journey so hated.

335

No, I say a dead man  
 is better off than these.

When a city is overpowered, oh god, no!  
 it suffers so many, many disasters.

One man hauls off another, or kills him,  
 or brings torches to set it ablaze, and the whole city  
 is choked with smoke.

340

Maddened Ares, subduer of people,  
 storms against the city, polluting all that is sacred.



## [Strophe 3]

345 Ear-splitting turmoil through the city and around it  
 a towering circle of men. Man sets upon man—  
 lays him low by the spear.  
 Blood-curdling bleatings  
 of babies nursing at the breast  
 350 blast the air.  
 Brothers are seized by running soldiers:  
 looter falls in with looter;  
 an empty-handed man calls to another,  
 looking for a partner in crime,  
 355 eager for no less or even equal share.  
 What is there left to guess from this?

## [Antistrophe 3]

Provisions of every sort, strewn on the ground  
 cause distress, a bitter sight  
 to householders.  
 360 The bounty of earth  
 turned into waste is swept along  
 in worthless waves.  
 Young women now enslaved feel new grief:  
 the wretched captive's bed  
 365 crushed by a triumphant enemy  
 in place of her happy husband:  
 this is what they have to hope for every night,  
 a new burden of sorrow and pain.<sup>35</sup>

*Handwritten note:* ~~set~~ slave

## Second Episode

## HALF CHORUS:

370 Look, the army's scout is here, I think,  
 my friends, bringing us new intelligence,  
 moving his feet like wheels driven in his haste.

*(Messenger enters, stage left.)*

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35. 369: See Hecht and Bacon (1973: 76), "The sack of the city is imagined as an inverted marriage ritual whose consummation is rape and death."



## HALF CHORUS:

And here, too, is our king, the son of Oedipus,  
just in time to hear the messenger's report:  
his haste makes his feet outrun each other.<sup>36</sup>

*(Eteocles enters, stage right, with six champions.)*<sup>37</sup>

## MESSENGER (SPY):

I am here to give an eye-witness account of the enemy, 375  
how each leader has his allotted post at the gates.

At this moment, Tydeus is ready to storm the Proetid  
gate, but the seer will not permit him to cross  
Ismenus, because the sacrifice does not bode well.

This Tydeus raging and ravenous for war 380  
squalls like a snake's hissing at noontime;  
spits out abuse at the seer, the wise son of Oecles,<sup>38</sup>  
accuses him of whimpering in fear of death and battle.

With such shrieks he shakes his triple-shadowing  
plumes, the helmet's crest. From inside his shield 385  
bells made of bronze ring out terror and flight.

He bears on his shield this arrogant device:

a design of the heavens blazing with stars,  
and in the middle, all aglow, the full moon,  
oldest of the stars, the eye of night, stands out. 390

Roused to such a pitch by his cocky trappings,  
he bellows beside the river bank, hungry for war,  
the way a horse, chafing at the bit, stands waiting  
impatiently for the sound of the trumpet.

Whom will you pick to face him, what champion 395  
to stand at the Proetid gate when the bars are loosed?

## ETEOCLES:

A man's trappings do not make me quiver:  
insignia have no power to wound their enemy;

36. 374: The line literally reads, "does not allow his feet to move evenly"; see Hutchinson (1985: 107) on line 374.

37. Some scholars do not agree (see Dawson 1970: 63, Taplin 1977: 149–50) that the Theban champions are present, but believe that Eteocles would have already dispatched them.

38. 382: The son of Oecles is Amphiaraus, a seer who was tricked by his wife into joining the expedition. See below, 568–96.



no crests, no bells can stab without the spear.  
 400 And this night you speak of plastered on his shield,  
 embellished with the twinkling stars of heaven;  
 possibly his lunacy will prove prophetic to him.  
 Yes, if night falls on his eyes when he is dead,  
 for the man carrying this bombastic device,  
 405 it would well and rightly be true to its name and  
 his insolence will prove prophet of his own doom.  
 My answer is to post opposite this Tydeus  
 the steady son of Astakos to defend this gate,  
 a true-born man who respects the throne of honor  
 410 and loathes language that is full of arrogance.  
 He's a man of courage and a stranger to wrong-doing.  
 His roots go back to the Sown Men spared by Ares,<sup>39</sup>  
 a true son of our land, is Melanippus here. Ares himself  
 with a throw of the dice will determine the outcome.  
 415 Yet Justice runs in his blood; it is she that sends him forth,  
 to drive back the enemy's spear from his mother Thebes.

CHORUS:

[Strophe 1]<sup>40</sup>

To our defender may the gods  
 grant success, as he sets out, with justice,  
 to fight for our city. I shudder to see

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39. 412: Sown Men (*Spartoi*): Cadmus was told by an oracle to follow a heifer until it collapsed and to found the city of Thebes on that site. A dragon, descendant of Ares, guarded the spring of Ares and other waters. Cadmus needed water and killed the dragon with Athena's help. Athena advised Cadmus to sow the teeth of the slain dragon in the earth. When he obeyed, grown men sprang from the earth fully armed. These are the *Spartoi* (Sown Men). They fought each other and all but five were killed. (See Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 638–75 and 934–44.) Only some of the Thebans are descendants of the Sown Men. Creon and his family are among them. This would make Oedipus and his children part *Spartoi* through their mother Jocasta, Creon's sister. Laios, Oedipus' father, was a descendant of Cadmus and Harmonia (see Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 7–8).

40. 417, etc.: The chorus sings between the descriptions of the sets of attackers and defenders.



the bloody deaths of men  
dying for those they love.

420

MESSENGER (SPY):

Yes, may the gods grant him the success he deserves.  
Next, Capaneus<sup>41</sup> has been allotted the Electra gate,  
another giant of a man even bigger than the last,  
his boast is beyond human reason—against our towers  
he threatens such outrage—which I pray the gods avert.  
He swears, whether the gods are willing or not,  
he will destroy the city: even Zeus, counterattacking  
with the fiery bolt, striking the ground at his feet,  
would not hold him back. Lightning and thunder  
he compared to the warmth of the midday sun.  
On his shield he holds the device of a naked man  
carrying fire, armed with a blazing torch in his hands.  
In gold letters it makes the claim, “I will burn the city.”  
Dispatch against such a man—uh, who will face him?  
Who can, without fear, await this man’s insolence?

425

430

435

ETEOCLES:

This second gain compounds the first with interest.  
Against men’s vain and empty imaginings,  
the tongue turns out to be a true accuser:  
Capaneus threatens and is ready for action,  
blaspheming the gods, giving his tongue a workout,  
in his empty glee, a mere man, he utters against heaven  
a sea swell of words loud enough for Zeus to hear.  
But I have confidence that on him, with justice,  
the fiery thunderbolt will crash down, not at all like  
the warm rays of the sun at the midday lull.  
Against him, however loud-mouthed he may be,  
a man fiery in temperament, strong Polyphontes,  
is posted, a trusted guardian, who has earned  
the favor of protecting Artemis and the other gods.  
Tell me who is the next, allotted the next gate?

440

445

450

---

41. 423: Capaneus’ name means “Smokey,” which turns out to be prophetic of his fate: he is, in fact, struck by the thunderbolt. For a graphic description of his death see Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* 1180–86.



## [Antistrophe 1]

## CHORUS:

Death to him with his grandiose boasts against the city.  
 I pray a blast of thunder will stop him  
 before he can leap into my home  
 455 and with insolent spear drag me out  
 of my maiden's chambers.

## MESSENGER (SPY):

Now I will tell of the one who drew the next lot  
 at the gates: to Eteocles third the third lot  
 sprang from the helmet wrought of solid bronze,  
 460 to attack with his contingent at the Neïstan gate.  
 In a circle he wheels his horses heaving angrily  
 in their bridles, eager to fall upon our gates.  
 Their muzzles, filled with breath snorting from  
 their nostrils, whistle an outlandish noise.  
 465 His shield is decorated by no insignificant sign:  
 a man in full armor climbs the rungs of a ladder  
 up to the enemy's battlement, bent on destroying it.  
 And in the letters' configuration he bellows  
 that not even Ares could throw him off the towers.  
 470 To face this man send someone you can trust  
 to drive away the yoke of slavery from our city.

## ETEOCLES:

Here's the man I would send now, a happy choice:  
 he's already gone, holding his boast in his two hands,  
 Megareus, son of Creon, from the race of the Sown Men,  
 475 who will not budge from his post at the gate. He will not be  
 frightened by the roar of the horses' furious snorting,  
 but either in death he will pay back the earth for his nurture,  
 or he will capture two men and the city on the shield  
 to ornament his father's house with these spoils.  
 480 Boast me the next, do not shy away from the telling.



## [Strophe 2]

## CHORUS:

I pray that he will succeed, ah,  
 defender of my home, and that they will fail.  
 Just as they utter ugly boasts against the city,  
 with maddened mind, so may Zeus  
 the Avenger cast the evil eye upon them.

485

## MESSENGER (SPY):

Next, the fourth, having the gate right by the side of  
 Onca Athena, with battle cry makes his way  
 forward, the massive figure of Hippomedon:  
 that huge orb,<sup>42</sup> I mean the circle of his shield,  
 I shuddered as he whirled it—I cannot deny it.  
 The designer who applied this work to the shield  
 was no second-rate craftsman: on it Typhon<sup>43</sup> was  
 depicted belching out dark smoke, glowing  
 sister of fire, through his fire-breathing mouth.  
 The surface of the hollow-bellied circle of the shield  
 is filled in with coiled serpents. The man himself  
 lets out a battle-cry; possessed by Ares, like a Bacchant,  
 he raves for the battle, terror shoots from his eyes.  
 We must guard well against the onset of such a man:  
 Panic is already swaggering at our gates.

490

495

500

## ETEOCLES:

First, Onca Athena living near the city, a neighbor  
 to these gates, who hates this man's insolence,  
 will keep him like a deadly serpent from our young.  
 And beside her, Hyperbius, brave son of Oenops,  
 has been chosen to counter him, man to man,

505

42. 489: *Orb*: the Greek word is *halōs*, “threshing floor” or “disk of the sun or moon.” Thoreau, using the English derivative, translates as “the huge halo.”

43. 492–4: *Typhon*, the youngest son of Gaia (Earth), was the scariest monster in Greek mythology. He tried to destroy Zeus and, though he won an early battle, was ultimately defeated by Zeus. A hundred-headed snake grew from his shoulders. See Hesiod, *Theogony* 820–68; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 351–72.



ready to test his destiny in fortune's time of need,  
 beyond reproach in body and spirit and in bearing  
 of his arms: Hermes<sup>44</sup> has matched them perfectly.  
 For the man is an enemy to the man he will face,  
 510 and on their shields they will bring together gods  
 hostile to each other: the one holds fire-breathing  
 Typhon, but on Hyperbius' shield sits Father Zeus,  
 poised with the blazing thunderbolt in his hand;  
 never in all of time has anyone seen Zeus defeated.  
 515 This is how the goodwill of the gods shows itself:  
 we are on the winners' side, they on the losers'.  
 If Zeus is truly mightier in battle than Typhon,  
 it's likely the opposing men will fare the same,  
 and to Hyperbius, in keeping with the sign's meaning,  
 520 Zeus, who appears on his shield, will prove his savior.

[Antistrophe 2]

CHORUS:

I feel confident that the man bearing  
 Zeus' hated enemy on his shield, the image  
 of the earthborn monster, likeness hateful to mortals  
 and to the long-lived gods,  
 525 will lose his life in front of the gates.

MESSENGER (SPY):

This is my hope too. Now I will name the fifth,  
 posted to the fifth gate, called the Northern,  
 right beside the monument to Amphion,<sup>45</sup> son of Zeus.  
 He swears by the spear he carries, in his brazenness,  
 530 honoring it more than a god, more than his own eyes,  
 that he will pillage the Cadmeians' city in spite of Zeus.  
 So boasts this pretty-faced progeny of a mother

---

44. 508: *Hermes*, the god of transitions and the guide between human and divine worlds, is also the god of the lot and bringer of good luck.

45. 528: *Amphion* with his twin brother Zethus ruled Thebes and built the walls around the city to the accompaniment of Amphion's lyre (see *Phoenician Women* 115 and note). In Euripides' *Phoenician Women* it is referred to as the monument to Zethus (145). Zethus was the strong athletic brother, Amphion the musician and artist.



who roams the mountains, this man, this boy-soldier.<sup>46</sup>  
 The first downy beard just now spreads over his cheeks  
 in the springtime of his youth, the thick hair sprouting up. 535  
 But his heart is cruel, unsuited to his maiden's name,  
 and with a Gorgon's glaring eyes he takes up his post.  
 He stands by the gate not holding back his boast:  
 on his bronze-studded shield, the circling defense  
 of his body, he brandishes our city's shame, 540  
 the Sphinx, eater of raw human flesh, fashioned  
 with heavy bolts, its polished form worked in relief,  
 and under her body she carries a lone Theban man,  
 so most of our spears and arrows will fall upon *him*.  
 He has come from far away and is not likely to make light 545  
 of the war nor bring shame on the long journey he made,  
 Arcadian Parthenopaeus, "Virgin-face." This is what he is,  
 a resident alien, and to repay Argos for its foster care,  
 he makes threats against our towers—may god avert them.

## ETEOCLES:

I pray the gods cause them to meet with what 550  
 they intend for us with these blasphemous boasts,  
 and then they would meet an evil and awful end.  
 Against this man, the Arcadian you speak of,  
 will go a soldier without boast, but his hand sees  
 what must be done—Actor, brother of the man 555  
 I just named, who will not let talk without deeds  
 stream through the gates and multiply our evils,  
 nor allow a man carrying the image of a murderous  
 hated beast on an enemy's shield to pass inside.  
 Outside, *she*<sup>47</sup> will blame him for trying to bring her in 560  
 when she meets constant hammering blows under  
 the city walls: god willing, I hope I speak the truth.

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46. 532–33: *Parthenopaeus* ("maiden-faced") is the son of Atalanta, the famous huntress who was raised by a bear.

47. 560: *She* is the Sphinx.



## [Strophe 3]

## CHORUS:

These words stab my breast,  
 my hair stands on end,  
 565 when I hear the noise of those loud-mouthed  
 blasphemous men. May the gods  
 strike them dead in our land.

## MESSENGER (SPY):

Sixth I name a man most modest and wise,  
 a prophet brave in battle, valiant Amphiaraus;  
 570 at the Homoloid gate, taking up his allotted post;  
 again and again he utters imprecations against  
 mighty Tydeus: "You murderer, disturber of peace  
 in the city, worst teacher of evil in all Argos,  
 summoner of the Fury of revenge, servant of death,  
 575 adviser to King Adrastus in his ruinous policies."  
 After that, addressing your very own brother,  
 mighty Polynices full of strife, turning up his eyes,  
 he dwells twice on the last syllables,<sup>48</sup> reviling  
 his name. And this speech issues from his mouth:  
 580 "A deed like yours, of course, is pleasing to the gods  
 and noble for future generations to hear and tell of:  
 that you are laying waste the city of your fathers  
 and ancestral gods and letting loose upon them  
 a foreign army. Dirce's spring, mother that gives you life,  
 585 what claim to justice will dry it up? Your fathers' land,  
 in your zeal, taken captive by your spear, how will it  
 be your ally? But what of me? Will I, god's prophet, enrich  
 this soil, laid to rest under ground in enemy territory?  
 Into the fray then! I do not foresee death with dishonor."<sup>49</sup>  
 590 This is what the seer said, calmly holding his shield  
 made of solid bronze. On its circle it bore no sign,  
 for he wishes not to seem but to be most noble,  
 reaping a harvest in the deep furrows of his mind

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48. 578: *-nices* of Polynices means "strife." See below, line 830.

49. 589: During the battle the earth opened up and Amphiaraus, chariot and all, was swallowed whole. The spot where he was engulfed became a sacred site and he a chthonic hero.



from which sprout his careful considerations.  
 Against him I advise you to send a wise and noble  
 opponent. A man who honors the gods inspires awe.

595

ETEOCLES:

Ah! When men's fortune brings together  
 a just man against those without the fear of god!  
 In every matter nothing is more evil than evil  
 association: its fruit is not to be harvested;  
 the field of doom yields a crop of death.  
 For if a god-fearing man gets on board ship  
 with sailors hot for some kind of felony,  
 he goes down with the god-forsaken crew;<sup>50</sup>  
 or a just man living among fellow-citizens  
 who hate strangers and are unmindful of the gods  
 unjustly slipping into the same trap, being struck  
 by the gods' indiscriminate lash, he falls with them.  
 So it happens with the seer, I mean Oecles' son,  
 a wise man, honest, noble, and god-fearing,  
 a great prophet, but, by associating with ungodly,  
 arrogant men, against his better judgment,  
 men who draw out a march too long to get back,  
 Zeus willing, he will be dragged down with them.  
 In fact, I think he will not even attack our gates,  
 not because he lacks spirit or is a coward at heart,  
 but he knows he will meet his end in battle  
 if the oracles of Apollo Loxias<sup>51</sup> are to come to fruition.  
 [But the god keeps silent or speaks as need requires.]<sup>52</sup>  
 Still, against this man, I will station mighty Lasthenes,  
 a man at the gates who will not welcome a stranger;

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620

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50. <sup>49</sup>602–4: The usual story pattern is the opposite: an impious man (such as the polluted rapist Ajax the Lesser) gets on board with a shipload of fair to middling men and takes the whole ship down with him. Amphiaraus' situation fits the story Eteocles tells, but the story pattern invites us to think of the opposite.

51. 618: *Loxias* is a cult title of Apollo as god of prophecy.

52. 619: This line is suspected of being an interpolation added to explain the condition in line 618, which does not need explanation since it is only formally conditional. Line 620 takes up the idea expressed in 615. The interruption of 619 is therefore unnecessary and even vapid.



mature in mind but young in body, his eye is quick  
 and his hands will not be slow to catch his opponent  
 with his spear where he's left defenseless by the shield.  
 625 In any event, human success is a gift from the gods.

[Antistrophe 3]

CHORUS:

Oh gods, hear our righteous prayers  
 and grant their fulfillment, that our city succeed  
 and turn away from our land evils brought by the spear;  
 turn them on the invaders. And Zeus, we pray, strike them  
 630 with the thunderbolt and kill them outside the walls.

MESSENGER (SPY):

The seventh man at the seventh gate, I will name  
 him now: it is your own brother. Against our city,  
 here are the disasters he prays and calls for in curses:  
 that he breach the battlements and be heralded in the land;  
 635 then raising his voice in a wild paeon of triumph,  
 that he meet you and kill you and die by your side,  
 or, if you survive, that he will pay you back, as a man  
 without rights driven from home in exile, as he was.  
 Such noises he snarls, and he calls upon the gods  
 640 of his people and his ancestral land to be keepers  
 of his prayers—this is the mighty Polynices.  
 He carries a shield, circular and newly made,  
 with double insignia artfully fashioned for it:  
 a woman, modest in her bearing, leads a man,  
 645 a soldier in full armor, overlaid in beaten gold.  
 She claims she is Justice, that's what the letters  
 spell out: "I will bring this man home, and he will  
 have a city and the run of his fathers' estates."  
 This is my full description of all their devices.  
 650 [You, now, must know whom to send to face him.]<sup>53</sup>

---

53. 650: Another interpolated line. The messenger has just concluded his description of the attackers with a summing up (649), and this frigid line breaks in before the messengers' conclusion by asking us to return to the individual attacker. Half of line 650 is also found in 652, literally "but you yourself know." Perhaps the line was added because the messenger's other speeches end similarly.



You will never find fault with me for my report.  
You alone know how to guide the ship of state.

*(Messenger exits, stage left.)*

ETEOCLES:

Oh, maddened by gods, by the gods deeply hated.  
Oh, our race of Oedipus, overflowing with tears.  
Ah me! Curses of my father now to be fulfilled! 655  
No, it does not suit me to cry out or shed tears,  
lest a sorrow harder to bear be brought to birth.  
To Polynices, so true to his name, I have this to say:  
soon we will know what effect his symbol will have,  
whether letters worked in gold babbling on his shield 660  
will bring him home, with his mind so unbalanced.  
If Justice, Zeus' maiden daughter, were present  
in his deeds and in his heart, this might have been.  
But not when he escaped the darkness of the womb  
nor in his growing up, not ever in his boyhood, 665  
nor in the gathering of the first beard on his chin  
did Justice look on him and find him worthy;  
and now, I think, in the devastation of the land  
of his fathers she will not take her stand by his side.  
Truly then Justice would in every way be false 670  
to her name if she stood by a man ready for any evil.  
Relying on this I will go and I will stand to face him  
myself: What other man has a better right than I?  
Ruler against ruler and brother against brother,  
hater against hater, I will face him. Quick, bring  
me my greaves, defense against spear and stones.<sup>54</sup>

CHORUS:

Oh no! My dear man, son of Oedipus, do not  
be like that man who voices ugly words in anger.  
It is enough that Cadmeians will go into the fray  
with the men of Argos—that blood can be expiated. 680

#6  
Rely on  
himself  
#7 In stanza  
plea + try  
to convince  
him not  
to

54. 676: Eteocles is clearly unarmed until this point. The greaves (leg armor) are put on first, then the breastplate, and finally the helmet. See Dawson's stage directions (1970: 90–92).



But self-inflicted death by men of the same blood  
like this: that brings a taint that never grows old.

#7  
Tells him  
of the  
danger of  
his honor

ETEOCLES:

If one is to suffer evil, let it be without disgrace,  
for among the fallen this is their only gain:  
685 nothing good can be said of death with dishonor.

[Strophe 1]

CHORUS:

My son, why are you so eager? Do not let Doom,  
greedy for war, filled with wrath, carry you away.  
Cast off the first evil inkling of lust for war.

ETEOCLES:

Since god is in such a hurry for the outcome,  
690 let the whole race of Laios, hated by Phoebus,  
go down on the wind, fated to Cocytus<sup>55</sup> waves.

[Antistrophe 1]

CHORUS:

Too fierce a desire urges you on  
to taste the bitter fruit of killing a man  
whose blood you must not shed.

attempt  
to say the wrong  
for war is a  
danger

ETEOCLES:

695 The hideous tragic curse of the father I loved  
sits upon my dry unweeping eyes, telling me  
of something gained first and later of death.

[Strophe 2]

CHORUS:

Do not let it push you on. You will not be called  
coward: you have led a life beyond that reproach.  
700 Will the black-robed Fury of revenge never leave this house  
when the gods receive sacrifice at your hands?

55. 691: *Cocytus*, one of the rivers in Hades, was the river of wailing.



ETEOCLES:

Long, it seems, we have been disregarded by the gods.  
The only pleasure they want from us is our demise.  
Why should we still shrink from the doom of death?

[Antistrophe 2]

CHORUS:

Doom now stands at your side; but the spirit,  
at the last minute, might alter its mood  
and come on with a gentler blast.  
Now it is still boiling.

705

ETEOCLES

Oedipus' curse brought it to the boil.  
Too true the visions from the phantoms  
of my sleep, dividing my father's estate.

# 8  
polymices  
started it

710

CHORUS:

Listen to us women, though you do not like to.

ETEOCLES:

Say something possible, but don't make it long.

CHORUS:

Do not take that journey to defend the seventh gate.

ETEOCLES:

Honed<sup>56</sup> as I am, you will not blunt me with speech.

715

CHORUS:

Victory, even of a coward, is what the gods honor.

---

56. 715: *Honed*: Eteocles becomes one with the sharpened iron of his sword. It is likely that he arms on stage, beginning with his call for his greaves (676, leg-armor that he would have to put on before his breast-plate). At this line he puts on his sword, in the next (717) he hoists his shield, and then at 719 he would take up his spear (see Bacon 1964: 34–36). This would have the effect of turning Eteocles into the living embodiment of the figure that is described on his brother's shield (644–45).



ETEOCLES:

No man-in-arms could put up with that sentiment.

CHORUS:

Do you want to reap your own brother's blood?<sup>57</sup>

ETEOCLES:

There is no escape from disasters sent by the gods.

*(Exit Eteocles, stage left.)*

## Second Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe 1]

720 I shudder at the demon,  
poison to this house, not like other gods,  
too true a prophet of evil,  
Fury of revenge, invoked by the father's prayer  
to bring to pass the angry curses  
725 of Oedipus, tormented in his mind:  
strife, lethal to his sons, stirs it up.

[Antistrophe 1]

730 A stranger pays out the inheritance,  
a Chalybian immigrant from Scythia,<sup>58</sup>  
bitter divider of possessions,  
cruel-minded iron,  
allotting the land to dwell in  
as much as will hold them when they are dead,  
without a share of all their broad acres.

57. 718: *Reap*, or as Verrall suggests "make a prize of" (1887: 86, note to his line 705).

58. 728: *The Chalybians* (or Chalybes), discoverers of iron, are here said to be Scythians.

#8 says it can't be avoided and is more honorable to win the war



## [Strophe 2]

But when in suicidal murder  
 they lie dead, killed by each other's hands, 735  
 and the dry dust of earth drinks  
 their black-clotted bloody gore,  
 who could provide expiation?  
 Who could cleanse them?  
 Ah, new troubles of the house 740  
 mixed with the evils born long ago.

## [Antistrophe 2]

Ancient is the trespass I tell of  
 but swift in retribution when it comes;  
 it remains into the third generation,  
 from the time when Laios against the will of Apollo, 745  
 who told him three times  
 at Delphi's central navel  
 in Pythian oracles<sup>59</sup> to die without children  
 and save his city.

## [Strophe 3]

Overpowered by his lustful urge, 750  
 he fathered a doom for himself,  
 patricidal Oedipus,  
 who lived to sow his seed  
 in his mother's sacred field where he was nurtured,  
 and planted a root with tainted blood. 755  
 Madness brought together  
 that crazed wedding couple.

## [Antistrophe 3]

A sea of evils brings the surge,  
 one wave falling as another rises  
 triple-crested, which even now pounds 760  
 against the ship of state.  
 Our defenses extend with just a narrow space

---

59. 745–48: Delphi, the site of Apollo's major oracle, was considered the center and the navel of the earth.



in between: the width of a tower.  
I fear our city will be overwhelmed  
765 along with our rulers.

[Strophe 4]

Curses uttered long ago, now fulfilled,  
are trafficked with peril. And deadly deeds  
once done do not pass away.  
The wealth of sea-faring men  
770 grown too heavy  
is thrown overboard from the sinking ship.

[Antistrophe 4]

What man was so admired  
by the gods and those sharing the city's hearth,  
the crowded assembly of mortals,  
775 as Oedipus was honored then,  
when he freed the land  
of its doom that preyed on men?

[Strophe 5]

When the unhappy man  
became aware of his tragic marriage,  
780 in his pain, grief-stricken,  
with madness in his heart,  
he dealt a double evil:  
with his patricidal hands  
he struck out his two eyes, dearer than his own sons.

[Antistrophe 5]

And on his sons for their cruel care  
he cast vengeful curses, alas,  
from his embittered tongue,  
that they divide his possessions  
armed with swords in their hands.  
790 And now I am afraid that  
swift of foot, she will bring them to pass, the Fury.



## Third Episode

*(Messenger enters, stage left.)*

MESSENGER:

Lift up your spirits, you daughters of doting mothers.  
 Our city has escaped the yoke of slavery;  
 the boasts of big men have sunk into the ground.  
 Coming into fair weather now, after much crashing  
 of the surging sea, the city has not taken on water. 795  
 Our battlements hold and we have hedged the gates  
 with champions standing sure in single combat.  
 Matters as a whole have gone well at six of the gates.  
 The seventh, the sacred leader of sevens,<sup>60</sup> 800  
 Lord Apollo, has singled out, fulfilling for Oedipus'  
 race the ancient wrongs committed by Laios.

CHORUS:

What new deed is there to hurt the city more?

MESSENGER:

The city is saved, but the kings of the same seed—

CHORUS:

What is it? Your words make me crazy with dread.<sup>61</sup> 805

MESSENGER:

Be calm and listen to me. The sons of Oedipus—

CHORUS:

Oh no! I am so sorry. I find myself a seer of evils.

---

60. 800: *Hebdomagetēs*, “leader of sevens” is an epithet for Apollo. Apollo is associated with seven (see, for example, Herodotus 6.57 on sacrifices to Apollo on the seventh of the month). Apollo’s birthday is on the seventh.

61. 805, 807: In stichomythia (dialogue in which single lines are spoken in turn by two or more characters) it sometimes happens that news is drawn out by the inane interruption of one of the interlocutors.



MESSENGER:

Without a doubt: they lie low, fallen in the dust.

CHORUS:

Out there, do they lie dead? It's grim, but tell us.

MESSENGER:

810 Dead. By their own hands they killed themselves.

CHORUS:

By brothers' hands were they killed together?

MESSENGER:

815 Closely, too closely, the same fate was shared by both.  
 Their destiny on its own squandered the ill-fated race.  
 Such deeds give us reason to be glad and to grieve:  
 that the city fares well, but the commanders,  
 the two leaders, have apportioned the total  
 of their possessions with the beaten Scythian iron.  
 They will keep as much land as they receive for a grave,  
 carried off, ill-fated by their father's curses.

820 [The city is saved; the blood of the two kindred kings  
 has fallen on the ground, each murdered by the other.]<sup>62</sup>

*(Exit messenger, stage right.)*

### Third Stasimon

CHORUS:

825 Oh, great Zeus and gods,  
 who keep our city safe, who saved  
 Cadmus' towers,  
 do I rejoice and raise the victory cry  
 for the survival of our city intact,  
 or shall I weep for the tragic, ill-starred  
 childless warrior kings  
 who, true to their name,

62. 820–21: These telegraphic lines are suspected of being taken from another text and copied into the margin (see Hutchinson's note on 804).

#9  
 The brothers  
 are dead, killed  
 by one another,  
 the city is  
 saved + will  
 be okay



both men full of strife,<sup>63</sup> 830  
 have died through their own impious intentions?

[Strophe 1]

Oh black curse of Oedipus  
 working its destruction on the race,  
 an evil chill falls over my heart.  
 For their tomb I make my song 835  
 in a frenzy when I hear  
 of the bloody corpses, dead  
 by tragic destiny. Of evil omen  
 comes this flute-accompanied song of the spear.

[Antistrophe 1]

They accomplished their end and did not renounce it, 840  
 the father's words uttered in prayer.  
 The wayward decisions of Laios have prevailed.  
 I am anxious for the city.  
 Divine oracles are not blunted.  
 Ah, full of grief, you have performed 845  
 this deed beyond understanding. There have come  
 sorrows to cry over and that is fact.

Exodos

*(The bodies are carried into the orchestra, stage left.)*

These are self-evident: the messenger's tale revealed to our eyes;  
 cares times two, two soldiers killed  
 tragically by their own hands, both doomed: 850  
 their suffering is complete. What more to say?  
 What else than more sorrows on top of those sorrows  
 that have settled in the house?  
 My friends, over the sighing of your laments,  
 with hands about your head slap the stroke 855

---

63. 830: *Men full of strife*, in Greek *poluneikeis*, as if they were both named Polynices.



that sends them on their way, crossing Acheron<sup>64</sup>  
 in the black-sailed convoy  
 to the land where Apollo does not set foot,  
 the sunless, unseen country  
 860 where all men are welcomed home.

*(Antigone and Ismene enter stage right.)*

And here come Antigone and Ismene  
 to this bitter business,  
 to sing the dirge for their brothers. Equally for both,<sup>65</sup>  
 I think, they will sing from the lovely deep folds  
 865 of their bosoms, a song of sorrow that is their due.  
 For us it is right, before they raise their voices,  
 to sound the harsh hymn  
 of the Fury of revenge  
 and to sing to Death  
 870 its hated song of triumph.  
 Ah, most unhappy in your brothers of all  
 who tie a twisted cord around their women's robes.  
 I weep, I sob, and without deceit  
 from my heart I raise the shrill sad sound.

[Strophe 1]

875 Ah, ah, out of your minds,  
 untrusting of friends, never wearying of woe,  
 you have taken ownership of your father's house  
 tragically by spear point.  
 Tragic men who met tragic deaths  
 880 to the grief of the house.

[Antistrophe 1]

Ah, ah, overthrowing the walls  
 of the house and looking

---

64. 856: *Acheron* is a river in Hades, the river of woe or pain. It is also a swamp in Aristophanes' *Frogs*.

65. 864: Or "without distinction," "unambiguously": that is, the sisters will honor their brothers without distinguishing them as patriot and traitor (see Verrall 1887 on line 849 in his edition).



toward poisonous single rule,  
 now you are reconciled by the iron.  
 The demonic Fury of revenge of your father  
 Oedipus has come true, too true.

885

## [Strophe 2]

Struck through  
 the left sides,  
 yes, struck clear through  
 flesh born of the same womb.  
 Alas god-inspired,  
 alas curses  
 of death  
 requiting death.

890

You speak of a blow struck through—  
 through the house, through their flesh,  
 by inutterable wrath  
 by the doom of their father's curse  
 shared with undivided mind.

895

## [Antistrophe 2]

A wail passes through the city,  
 the towers groan,  
 the land that loves its people groans.  
 But possessions remain for those who come after,  
 those doomed to a bitter fate:  
 through them strife has come  
 and its end is death.

900

In their hearts' bitterness they divided  
their possessions, an equal share for each.  
 For those who loved them the mediator  
 is not blameless: Ares receives no thanks.

905

910

## [Strophe 3]

Struck by the iron they lie here.  
 Struck by the iron this awaits them.  
 What? Someone may ask.  
 Shares of their fathers' graves.



915 Shrill sounds of the house echo around them:<sup>66</sup>  
 a heartrending wail attends them,  
 its own cry, its own pain,  
 with woeful mind, truly joyless,  
 shedding tears from the heart,  
 920 which wither away as I weep  
 for these two lords lying here.

[Antistrophe 3]

It may be said of the two wretched men  
 that they did much harm to the citizens  
 and much to the foreign foe,  
 925 fallen row on row in the war.  
 Unhappy the mother who gave them birth  
 more than all women called  
 mothers of children.  
 She took as her husband her own child  
 930 and bore these, who ended their lives  
 with hands that murdered each other,  
 men of the same seed.

[Strophe 4]

Of the same seed, yes; utterly destroyed  
 in loveless division,  
 935 with maddened strife  
 their conflict ends.  
 Their hatred has ended. With the earth  
 soaked in blood, their lives  
 are mingled. They are now truly one in blood.  
 940 A cruel conciliator of their quarrels, the stranger  
 from beyond the sea let loose from the fire,  
 sharpened iron: bitter was the evil divider  
 of their property, Ares, making their father's  
 curse come true.

---

66. 915: "The text of this line cannot be recovered" (Hutchinson 1985: 197).



## [Antistrophe 4]

The tragic brothers have their allotted portions  
of Zeus-sent sorrows. 945

Under their corpses will lie  
a bottomless wealth of earth.

Ah, with countless toils  
you have festooned your house. 950

The curses, now fulfilled, raise  
their shrill triumph song, the family  
turned in rout this way and that.

At the gates stands a trophy of Doom  
where they struck each other. The evil spirit 955  
has defeated them both and is gone.

*(Antigone and Ismene at the biers of  
their brothers sing the dirge.)*

ANTIGONE:

You struck, you were struck.

ISMENE:

You killed and you died.

ANTIGONE:

By the spear you killed.

ISMENE:

By the spear you died.

ANTIGONE:

Sad toils. 960

ISMENE:

Sad troubles.

ANTIGONE:

Sounds of grief pour forth.

ISMENE:

Tears of grief flow forth.



ANTIGONE:

You lie dead.

OMG  
I am scared!  
Love u  
Aga

ISMENE:

965

By your hand he died.

ANTIGONE:

Eh, eh.

ISMENE:

Eh, eh.

ANTIGONE:

My mind is distraught with grief.

ISMENE:

My heart sobs inside my breast.

ANTIGONE:

Ah, ah. You, full of lamentation.

ISMENE:

970

And you, full of sorrows.

ANTIGONE:

By your own kin you were killed.

ISMENE:

And yes, you killed your own kin.

ANTIGONE:

Twofold to tell.

ISMENE:

Twofold to see.

ANTIGONE:

975

Their woes are beside them.

ISMENE:

Brother lies beside brother.



CHORUS:

Oh, tragic fate, giver of grief.  
mighty shade of Oedipus,  
dark Fury of revenge, your power is great.

ANTIGONE:

Eh, eh.

ISMENE:

Eh, eh.

980

ANTIGONE:

Sorrows hard to look at—

ISMENE:

—he showed to me when he came home from exile.

ANTIGONE:

But he did not come back after he had killed.

ISMENE:

He survived and then he lost his life.

ANTIGONE:

Yes, truly, he lost his life—

985

ISMENE:

and deprived *him* of his.

ANTIGONE:

Tragic family.

ISMENE:

Tragic suffering.

ANTIGONE:

Grievous cares of blood kin—

ISMENE:

drenched in triple sorrows.

990



CHORUS:

Oh, tragic fate, giver of grief.  
Mighty shade of Oedipus,  
dark Fury of revenge, your power is great.

ANTIGONE:

You knew as you reached your goal—

ISMENE:

995 —and you learned at the same time.

ANTIGONE:

When you came home to the city—

ISMENE:

—you faced him, spear in hand.

ANTIGONE:

Deadly to tell.

ISMENE:

Deadly to see.

ANTIGONE:

1000 Ah the toils.

ISMENE:

Ah the troubles.

ANTIGONE:

To home and country.

ISMENE:

And most of all to me.

ANTIGONE:

And more than that to me.

ISMENE:

1005 Ah for the pain of grief, oh king.



ANTIGONE:

Most grievous of all mankind.

ISMENE:

Ah, ah, god-possessed by Doom.

ANTIGONE:

Ah, ah. Where will we lay them in the ground?

ISMENE:

Ah. Where it is most honored.

ANTIGONE:

Ah. One more burden to lay by father's side.

1010

### [Epilogue<sup>67</sup>

*(Herald enters, stage right.)*

HERALD:

I am here to proclaim the decisions of the people's council of the city of Cadmus: it is decreed that Eteocles, for his good service to the country, will be buried in this land with proper rites.

He hated our enemies and chose death in the city; he was free of offense against our fathers' sacred places; he died where young men die with glory.

1015

That is what I was sent to say concerning his remains, but his brother, Polynices, lying dead beside him, is to be cast outside the city, unburied, prey to dogs, because he intended the overthrow of Cadmus' land, if one of the gods had not blocked his way with his brother's spear. Even dead he will carry the stain of his ancestral gods, whom he held in dishonor

1020

---

67. *Epilogue*: Most editors believe this is the end of the play Aeschylus wrote. The whole epilogue (1011–83) was probably added by a post-Aeschylean producer to make this tragedy fit the story as dramatized by Sophocles in his *Antigone* and by Euripides at the end of *Phoenician Women*, both of which had become very popular. For a thorough analysis of the interpolated scene, see Taplin 1977: 180–91.



1025 when he tried to capture the city at the head of a foreign army.  
Therefore it is decreed that he receive the distinction  
of being "buried" without honor by the winged birds.  
And he is not to get a funeral mound raised by hand,  
1030 nor be honored with the high keening songs of lament,  
but to be cast out without the rites of burial by his kin.  
So it was decided by decree of the Cadmeians.

ANTIGONE:

I have this to say to the leaders of the Cadmeians:  
unless anyone else is willing to join me in burying him,  
I will inter him myself and risk the danger  
1035 of burying my brother, and I am not ashamed  
if the city considers me disloyal or subversive.  
Sacred is the common womb of our suffering mother  
from which we were born and from an unhappy father.  
Therefore, my willing heart will share in misfortunes  
1040 with one whose will is gone, the living with the dead  
with a sister's love. His flesh no hollow-bellied wolves  
will tear to pieces. Do not proclaim your decree to me.  
Yes, I will dig a grave for him and contrive for him  
a means of covering his body, though I am a woman.  
1045 I will carry it in the folds of my linen garment.  
I will cover him myself. Decree me no other decrees.  
Be strong, my heart. The means to do it is at hand.

HERALD:

I am warning you not to defy the city in this way.

ANTIGONE:

I am warning you to stop making proclamations to me.

HERALD:

1050 After the recent brush with disaster the people are harsh.

ANTIGONE:

Let them be harsh. This man will not go unburied.

HERALD:

But will you honor with burial a man the city hates?



ANTIGONE:

His affairs have not been honored by the gods of late.

HERALD:

He was not dishonored until he put this land in danger.

ANTIGONE:

He suffered wrong and answered it with wrong.

1055

HERALD:

But this deed was carried out against us all, not one alone.

ANTIGONE:

Strife, last of the gods, brings the story to an end.  
I will bury him. There is no need to over talk it.

HERALD:

Well, you will do as you wish. I advise against it.

*(Herald exits, stage right.)*

CHORUS:

Ah, ah.

Oh, far-famed bringers of ruin,  
spirits of Death, Furies of revenge, who brought down  
Oedipus' race, root and branch.  
What to do, how to go on, what to contrive?

1060

*(To Polynices.)*

How will I have the heart not to grieve for you,  
not to accompany you to the tomb?  
But I am afraid and I turn away  
in dread of the citizens.

1065

*(To Eteocles.)*

You, at least, will have  
many mourners. But *he*, poor man, without lament  
will go with only his sister's mournful dirge.  
Who could agree to that?

1070



## HALF-CHORUS 1:

Let the city punish or not punish  
those who mourn Polynices.

1075 We will go and join in burying him  
in the funeral procession. For to our race  
this grief is in common, and the city  
approves as right now one thing, now another.

## HALF-CHORUS 2:

And we will go with this one just as the city  
and Justice approve.

1080 For second only to the blessed gods and Zeus almighty,  
he protected the city of Cadmus  
from going down and being overwhelmed  
by a surge of men from another land, he more than anyone.

*(The two funeral processions file out.)*

\* Chorus splits in 2



## Appendix B: Scenic Outlines

### Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*

#### *Prologue:* (1–77) Eteocles, Messenger

Eteocles addresses the Theban citizens. The messenger, Eteocles' spy, arrives with updates on the battle strategies of the enemy.

#### *Parodos:* (78–180)

Chorus enters in terror.

#### *Episode 1:* (181–288) Eteocles, Chorus

Eteocles upbraids the Chorus for being frightened.

#### *Stasimon 1:* (289–375)

Chorus sings of a city captured.

#### *Episode 2:* (375–719) Eteocles, Messenger with the chorus commenting

Description of the attackers and defenders chosen to face them: the battle of the shields.

#### *Stasimon 2:* (720–91)

Chorus sings of the curse on the family from Laios through Oedipus to his sons.

#### *Episode 3:* (792–820) Chorus, Messenger

The city is saved; the brothers are dead.



*Stasimon 3: (821–74)*

The curse and its fulfillment.

*Exodos: (875–1010)* Chorus, Antigone, Ismene

*Kommos* (lament): Chorus [and later Antigone and Ismene] grieve over the brothers. The children of Oedipus are all gathered for the last time. [The Herald enters to forbid the burial of Polynices.]

The focus at the beginning of the play is on the city, but moves to the family and finally to the last two sons and their fulfillment of the curse.